

KEEPING THE PROMISE

Leaders of the
Civil Rights Movement

HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE LEADERS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT?

While it is true that Martin Luther King is the most familiar face and voice of the Civil Rights Movement of the '50's and '60's, the success of the Movement depended upon the heroism and commitment of many other individuals and organizations to bring about change. How many of the names listed below are familiar to you? How much do you know about the organizations they led and their role in bringing together the thousands who risked their livelihoods, their safety and their lives in the quest for racial equality? As a nation, we have not yet fully achieved our goal, and if you want to be part of the continuing effort, you should know a little about those who brought us this far.

The following brief biographies (listed alphabetically) are excerpts from Wikipedia. You're encouraged to check on-line for more information, including some original sources Wikipedia consulted. Despite its length, the following list is not comprehensive, but it provides a starting point for your exploration.

Ralph David Abernathy, Sr. (b. March 11, 1926 – d. April 17, 1990) was a minister, and a close associate of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the Southern **Christian Leadership Conference**. He distributed flyers asking the black citizens of Montgomery to stay off the buses for one day after Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat to a white man resulted in her arrest. This grew into the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott led by Martin Luther King. Abernathy endured bombings, violent and brutal beatings by southern policemen and state troopers, 44 arrests, daily death threats against him and his wife and children, as well as the confiscation of family land and his automobile, which his family had to re-purchase at public auction. After King's assassination, Dr. Abernathy took up the leadership of the SCLC Poor People's Campaign and led the march on Washington planned for May, 1968.

Horace Julian Bond, known as **Julian Bond** (b. January 14, 1940, in Nashville, Tennessee). His father was a doctor and later became president of a historically black college. Bond is a social activist and leader in the Civil Rights Movement, politician, professor and writer. While at Morehouse College, he was a student in the only class taught by Martin Luther King. He helped found the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee** (SNCC) in 1960, and then left Morehouse in 1961. He returned in 1971 to complete his B.A. in English. He was the first president of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which later successfully pursued a suit against one of the Klan organizations that resulted in a financial penalty that bankrupted it. SPLC publishes the magazine "Teaching Tolerance". Bond served for 20 years in both houses of the Georgia Legislature. He was chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1998 to 2010.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (W.E.B. DuBois) (b. February 23, 1868 – d. August 27, 1963), born in Massachusetts. He was one of the co-founders of the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**. Racism was the main target, and he strongly protested against lynching, Jim Crow laws, and discrimination in education and employment. He was an ardent peace activist and advocated for nuclear disarmament. The Civil Rights Act, embodying many of the reforms DuBois had campaigned for all his life, was enacted one year after his death. The Souls of Black Folk, was a seminal work in African-American literature, and his 1935 magnum opus, Black Reconstruction in America, challenged the prevailing orthodoxy that blacks were responsible for the failures of Reconstruction era.

James L. Farmer, Jr. (b. January 12, 1920 – d. July 9, 1999). Farmer was born in Marshall, Texas, where his father was a professor at a historically black college. He was a prodigy and admitted to Wiley College (a small black college in Texas) at 14. He was recruited as a debater on the team that was the subject of the movie “The Great Debaters” (although the opponent they defeated was not Harvard but the University of Southern California, then holder of the championship).

Farmer was a civil rights activist and a leader of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s. He was a conscientious objector during World War 2, and subscribed to the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi. In 1942, Farmer and a group of students co-founded the Committee of Racial Equality, later known as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an organization that sought to bring an end to racial segregation in America through active nonviolence. Farmer was the organization’s first leader, serving as the national chairman from 1942 to 1944. In 1942, he led groups of black and white CORE members in a successful sit-in tactic to desegregate the Jack Spratt diner in Chicago. Farmer was the initiator and primary organizer of the 1961 Freedom Rides that eventually led to the desegregation of inter-state bus travel in the United States.

Jesse Louis Jackson, Sr. (b. October 8, 1941) is a civil rights activist and Baptist minister. He was a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984 and 1988 and served as shadow senator for the District of Columbia from 1991 to 1997. In 1971, he founded **PUSH**, dedicated to improving economic conditions in the black communities across the U.S. In 1994, he founded the **Rainbow Coalition**, which sought equal rights for all Americans. In 1996, the two entities merged to form **Rainbow/PUSH**. In an AP-AOL “Black Voices” poll in February, 2006, Jackson was voted “the most important black leader”, with 15% of the vote.

John Robert Lewis (b. February 21, 1940). Lewis’ parents were sharecroppers. He attended the American Baptist Theological School and Fisk University. He was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement and, as chairman of the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee** (SNCC), played a key role in the struggle to end segregation. He was one of the first group of 13 Freedom Riders and was arrested 24 times while he was in the Movement. He endured brutal beatings by angry mobs and suffered a fractured skull at the hands of the Alabama police in the Selma march in 1965. He was nearly beaten to death in Montgomery and still bears the scars. He has served as the Democratic representative from Georgia’s 5th Congressional district since 1987.

Malcolm X (b. May 19, 1925 – d. February 21, 1965), born **Malcolm Little** in Omaha, Nebraska, and also known as **El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz**, was an African-American Muslim minister, public speaker, and human rights activist. To his admirers, he was a courageous advocate for the rights of African Americans, a man who indicted white America in the harshest terms for its crimes against black Americans. His detractors accused him of preaching racism, black supremacy, antisemitism, and violence. He has been described as one of the great African Americans in history. In 1998, Time named The Autobiography of Malcolm X one of the ten most influential nonfiction books of the 20th century.

By the time Malcolm was thirteen, his father had died and his mother had been committed to a mental hospital, after which Malcolm lived in a series of foster homes. He became involved in hustling and other criminal activities in Boston and New York, and, in 1946, was sentenced to eight to ten years in prison.

In prison, Malcolm became a member of the **Nation of Islam**, and took the name Malcolm X. For twelve years after his parole in 1952, he was one of the Nation’s leaders and the public face of the controversial Islamic group. Tension between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, head of the Nation of Islam, led to Malcolm X’s departure from the organization in March, 1964. After leaving, Malcolm X became a Sunni Muslim and made a pilgrimage to Mecca. He disavowed racism after he returned to the U.S. He traveled extensively throughout Africa and the Middle East, founded Muslim Mosque, Inc. (a religious organization) and the secular, Pan-Africanist, **Organization of Afro-American Unity**. Less than a year after Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam, three members of the group assassinated him as he gave a speech in New York.

Thurgood Marshall (b. July 2, 1908 - d. January 24, 1993) was an eminent American jurist, best remembered for his legal philosophy in the fields of criminal procedures and civil rights. Marshall earned a degree from Howard University School of Law. In 1940, he was appointed as the Chief Counsel of the **NAACP**. His most important contribution to the Civil Rights Movement came in 1954, when he argued and won the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case in the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court agreed that the laws which supported separate public schools for black and white students indirectly denied black children their right to equal educational opportunities. This victory was one of the pivotal events of the Civil Rights Movement. Having argued more cases before the Supreme Court than any other lawyer before or since, in June, 1967, Marshall was chosen to serve on the Supreme Court, thus becoming the first African American to achieve this distinction.

Rosa Parks (b. February 4, 1913 – d. October 24, 2005). Recognized as the “Mother of the Modern-Day Civil Rights Movement”, Rosa Parks was an African American civil rights activist. In 1955, while she was secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, she refused to obey the bus driver when he ordered her to give her seat to a white passenger and was arrested. She had not acted in behalf of the NAACP, but her refusal to give up her seat triggered the Montgomery Bus Boycott. “People say I refused to give up my seat because I was tired. The only tired I was, was tired of giving in.” As a result of her action, both she and her husband were fired from their jobs, and they moved to Detroit to find work. There, Parks continued to play a vital role in the movement, working with other civil rights leaders to end racial segregation. She died in Detroit.

A. (Asa) Philip Randolph (b. April 15, 1889 – d. May 16, 1979) was born in Florida. His father was a tailor and minister, and his mother was a seamstress, and both believed strongly in self-defense. He read W.E.B. DuBois, but disagreed with the moderate reform and racial integration advocated by DuBois, and favored socialism and craft unionism. He moved to New York in 1911, intending to become an actor. Randolph married in 1913, and helped organize the Shakespearean Society in Harlem, with whom he played Hamlet, Othello, and other roles, but continued his organizing role as part of the American Socialist Party. He organized the elevator operators in New York City in 1917, and became president of the National Brotherhood of Workers of America (a union of African American shipyard and dock workers) in Virginia. He organized the **Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters** and was elected President. The Pullman Company finally began to negotiate with the Brotherhood in 1935 and agreed to a contract in 1937, resulting in pay increases, a shorter workweek, and overtime pay for the porters. With Bayard Rustin he proposed a march on Washington to protest racial discrimination in war industries, which prompted President Roosevelt to issue the Fair Employment Act Executive Order in 1943. In 1947, Randolph’s efforts to end racial segregation in the armed forces were successful, resulting in President Truman’s Executive Order abolishing such segregation. He participated in the 1963 March on Washington.

Bayard Rustin (b. March 17, 1912 – d. August 24, 1987). Rustin was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and was reared by his grandparents, one of whom was a Quaker and a member of the NAACP. He was an accomplished musician and was awarded music scholarships to attend Wilberforce College and Cheyney State Teachers College. In 1937, he moved to Harlem and became a member of the Communist Party. After Germany invaded Russia, Stalin ordered the Party in the U.S. to abandon civil rights work. Disillusioned, Rustin and A. Philip Randolph (the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters) joined others in threatening a march on Washington by blacks to protest discrimination in the armed forces, resulting in the issuing of an Executive Order banning discrimination in defense industries and federal agencies.

In 1942, he joined with James Farmer in the founding of CORE (the **Congress of Racial Equality**). He traveled to California to help protect the property of Japanese Americans, who had been imprisoned in internment camps. He was an early freedom rider, arrested in 1942 in Nashville, for sitting at the front of an interstate bus. He was jailed as a conscientious objector from 1944-6.

Bayard Rustin - continued

In 1948, he travelled to India to learn techniques of nonviolent civil resistance directly from leaders of the Gandhian movement. In 1956, he took leave from the War Resisters League to advise Martin Luther King, Jr. on Gandhian tactics to use in the Montgomery bus boycott. He then worked with King and other civil rights groups in planning the 1963 March on Washington.

Seeing the injustice that Soviet Jews faced, Rustin became a leading voice in advocating movement of Jews from the Soviet Union to Israel, and worked with Senator Jackson of Washington, who introduced legislation that tied trade relations with the Soviet Union to their treatment of Jews.

After passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act, Rustin advocated closer ties between the Civil Rights Movement and the working class base of the Democratic Party. He worked to strengthen the labor movement as the champion of empowerment for the Negro community and for economic justice for all Americans. Asked why he didn't devote his energies to opposing the Vietnam War, he responded: "Someday, God help us, the war will be over, and my job is to help see to it when black soldiers come home, they will have something decent to come home to."

Despite Rustin's success in organizing these events, some civil rights leaders did not want him to receive any public credit because of his earlier Communist Party affiliation and his sexual orientation. Rustin testified on behalf of New York State's Gay Rights Bill in 1986.

Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth (b. March 18, 1922 – d. October 5, 2011), born Freddie Lee Robinson in Mt. Meigs, Alabama, adopted his stepfather's name. Serving as pastor of the Bethel Baptist church in Birmingham (1953), he was also Membership Chairman of the NAACP. When Alabama outlawed the NAACP (1956), he founded the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), which took on the work formerly done by the NAACP, using both litigation and direct action to pursue its goals. Thus, it sued the City when it refused to hire black police officers and, after the Supreme Court ruled against bus segregation, declared that it would challenge local segregation laws.

In 1956, on Christmas Day, in the first of three bombings targeting Shuttlesworth and his church during his work as an activist, 16 sticks of dynamite were placed under his bedroom window. Shuttlesworth escaped unharmed, although his house was heavily damaged. When told by a Klan member police officer that he should leave town, he replied, "I wasn't saved to run."

In 1957, he worked with Martin Luther King Jr., Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, and others to found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1960, he participated in lunch counter sit-ins and, in 1961, worked with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to organize the Freedom Rides.

Eugene "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's Commissioner of Public Safety, directed handlers of police dogs to attack unarmed demonstrators and firefighters to use hoses to knock down children protestors. His tactics in defense of segregation intimidated some blacks but did not stop the demonstrations. In addition, they resulted in televised images of the violence used against nonviolent protestors that strongly influenced the view of the Civil Rights Movement by whites outside Alabama.

In 1961, partly because some of his congregation felt Shuttlesworth devoted too much of his time and effort to civil rights activities, thus paying too little attention to more conventional church responsibilities, Shuttlesworth moved to a church in Cincinnati, Ohio, but continued to lead and participate in demonstrations in Alabama and Florida.

In 1963, Shuttlesworth invited Dr. King to Birmingham to lead an effort to end segregation there. At one of the events Shuttlesworth was arrested and eventually convicted of parading without a permit. That decision was overturned in 1969 by the Supreme Court, who determined that the permit had been denied not to control traffic but to censor ideas.

Roy Wilkins (b. August 30, 1901 – d. September 8, 1981) was a noted civil rights activist, who strongly opposed militancy in the Civil Rights Movement and believed in achieving reform by legislative means. An active leader of the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**, he was appointed executive secretary in 1955, and executive director in 1964. Earlier, he had served as the editor of the NAACP's magazine, "The Crisis". He was a founder of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, one of the first civil rights coalitions. During the 60's, he participated in various protest marches, including the March on Washington, in 1963, and the March Against Fear, in 1966.

Andrew Young (b. March 12, 1932, in New Orleans). His mother was a teacher and his father, a dentist. After considering a career in dentistry, he chose the ministry and was appointed pastor in a church in Marion. As a young boy, boxing lessons mandated by his father "to teach him and his brother to defend themselves" led Young to renounce violence, and Young began to study Gandhi's concept of non-violent resistance as a tactic for social change. In 1957, he moved to New York City to work with the Youth Division of the National Council of Churches. When the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, he returned to the South in 1960, joined the Southern Christian Leadership Council as one of Dr. King's principal lieutenants, and worked to register black voters. He was jailed for his participation in demonstrations in Alabama and Florida, and was working with King in Memphis when King was assassinated in 1968.

Beginning in 1972, Young served three terms in Congress as a representative from Georgia. In 1981, he became Mayor of Atlanta, winning 55% of the vote and was reelected in 1985, with 80% of the vote. After his political career, Young served as president of the National Council of Churches in 2000. In 2003, he founded the Andrew Young Foundation to support and promote education, health, leadership and human rights in the United States, Africa and the Caribbean.

Whitney Young (b. July 31, 1921 – d. March 11, 1971), was born in Shelby County, Kentucky. His mother was the first African American postmistress in Kentucky and the second in the country. His father was president of the Lincoln Institute. He graduated from Kentucky State with a B.S. and, during World War II, he was trained in electrical engineering at MIT and assigned to a road construction crew of black soldiers supervised by Southern white officers. After just three weeks, he was promoted from private to first sergeant. Young's success in mediating between the white officers, angered by his promotion, and black soldiers, angered by their poor treatment, influenced his choice of a career in race relations, earning a Masters degree in social work in 1937. He volunteered for the local Urban League, and, in 1950 became president of the chapter in Omaha. He was appointed Dean of Social Work at Atlanta University.

In 1960, he joined the NAACP and rose to become state president. In 1961, at 40, he became Executive Director of the National Urban League, a post he held until his death. As director, he pressed major corporations to hire more blacks. He developed close relationships with CEOs such as Henry Ford II, prompting some criticism that he had sold out to the white establishment; but Young stressed the importance of working within the system to effect change. He was one of the organizers of the March on Washington, despite the opposition of many white business leaders.

Lyndon Johnson awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1969. Young served as president of the National Association of Social Workers from 1969-1971 and called on social workers to address social welfare through poverty reduction, race reconciliation, and putting an end to the War in Vietnam.